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ABSTRACT

Public concern about the quality of education is increasing dramatically. This report presents findings of a national survey conducted by the Education Commission of the States (ECS) following the November 1996 general election. Data were gathered through a telephone survey of 1,200 registered voters, 40 percent of whom were Republicans, 40 percent of whom were Democrats, and 20 percent of whom were Reform Party/independents. Forty-nine percent said that candidates' stands on public education made a real difference in who they voted for in presidential and congressional races. Seventy-two percent of voters placed education reform at the top of the 1997 congressional agenda, along with crime and Medicare. A majority of respondents said that they wanted teaching that clearly links studies to real life, tough academic standards, more parent influence at the school level, and less bureaucracy. Most attributed public schools' disappointing performance to bureaucratic control, safety and discipline problems, insufficient money for teachers and programs, inadequately prepared teachers, and special interest groups with conflicting goals. Almost half said that high schools did not adequately prepare students for higher education. Fifty-four percent said that public schools need a major overhaul (of that percent, 27 percent were favorable to vouchers and charter schools). Finally, respondents identified the most important improvements that schools could make: (1) raise expectations of student learning; (2) set clear standards; and (3) teach young people how to apply what they have learned. Nine graphs and four charts are included. (LMI)

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EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE STATES

America's Public Schools Must Change ... But Can They?

Results from the ECS 1996 National Post-Election Voter Survey

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America's Public Schools Must Change ... But Can They?

Results from the ECS 1996 National Post-Election Voter Survey

May 1997

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ECS EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE STATES

New American Schools

This document is part of the Education Commission of the States' work with states and school districts using New American Schools and other promising school reform networks to improve education. It is funded by a generous grant from The Annenberg Foundation.

This report was written by Arleen Arnsparger, ECS director of communications, and Cathy Ziemba, project specialist; edited by Suzanne Weiss, writer/editor; designed and produced by KSA Group.

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The Education Commission of the States is a nonprofit, nationwide interstate compact formed in 1965 to help governors, state legislators, state education officials and others develop policies to improve the quality of education. The ECS office is located in Denver, Colorado.

The New American Schools Development Corporation, established July 8, 1991, is a bipartisan, nonprofit, 501(c)(3) organization formed by American corporate and foundation leaders. Its mission is to help communities throughout the United States improve their public schools by implementing school improvement designs that the New American Schools' design teams have developed.

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INTRODUCTION

The nation's voters want to see major changes in our public education system, but are losing hope that those changes can happen. Increasingly, they are willing to look at alternatives to the present system — including those outside of public education.

These are the findings from a national survey conducted by the Education Commission of the States (ECS) following the November 1996 general election. Working with the research firm of Research/Strategy/Management (RSM) Inc., ECS asked registered voters across the country their views on education. ECS posed these questions:

- **What things made the most difference to you in the November presidential and congressional races?**
- **What issues should be given top priority in the 1997 congressional agenda?**
- **What is the greatest obstacle to needed changes in our public schools?**
- **Other than cost, what is the greatest obstacle facing our kids in getting the kind of higher education that will lead to a job?**
- **To what degree do public schools need to be changed?**
- **If major changes in public schools are possible, what major changes would you like to see implemented first?**

The full text of the questions appears throughout this report.

Between November 9-14, 1996, RSM, Inc. surveyed 1,200 registered voters in personal telephone interviews. Seventy-two percent of the respondents voted in the most recent elections. They were evenly split between major political parties — 40% Republican and 40% Democrat — with Reform Party/independents making up the remaining 20%. The margin of error for samples of this size is +/- 2.9 percentage points. The findings of those interviews follow.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Public worry about the quality of education is increasing dramatically. The nation's voters want to see major changes in our public education system, but are losing hope that those changes can happen. Increasingly, they are willing to look at alternatives to the present system — including alternatives outside of public education.

Public Education Tops Voters' Concerns

One in two voters (49%) say that candidates' stands on public education make a real difference in who they voted for in presidential and congressional races. In fact, the issue of public education tied in voters' minds with ethics and character of candidates. Interestingly, 42% of the people surveyed say party affiliation made no difference in how they voted.

Voters Want Congress to Improve Education in 1997

Voters place education reform at the top of the 1997 congressional agenda, along with crime and Medicare — 72% of the voters give education a very high or top priority for action.

Major Public School Improvement Faces Many Obstacles

Public schools are not meeting voters' expectations, and the public feels several obstacles must be addressed before significant improvements can be made. Voters want:

- **Teaching that clearly links studies to real life**
- **Tough academic standards**
- **More parent influence at the school level**
- **Less bureaucracy.**

Most people surveyed are clear about the reasons why schools are not measuring up:

- **Too much bureaucratic control over what schools can and cannot do (28%)**
- **Too many safety and discipline problems (22%)**
- **Not enough money for teachers and programs (20%)**
- **Teachers not well-enough prepared for the challenges they face (13%)**
- **Too many special interests with conflicting goals (10%).**

Higher Education Could Do Better If High Schools Were Better

Voters believe that higher education could better prepare young people for the job market if students coming out of high schools were better prepared. When asked about factors other than cost that influence higher education's effectiveness in preparing students for the workforce, voters consistently target problems in high schools. Almost half those surveyed (47%) say poor academic preparation in high schools is the biggest problem facing young people in getting the kind of higher education that will lead to a job. This is followed by a belief that there is a lack of career guidance and technical training in high school (25%).

Voters Are Looking Seriously at Alternatives to Public Schools

More than half the voters surveyed favor a major overhaul of public schools or believe the time has come to look outside the public system to improve the quality of education. And, next to parents of children who are currently attending private and parochial schools, the greatest support for alternatives outside the public school system comes from parents of preschool children.

It's Time for Real-Life Learning and Higher Standards in Schools

Voters believe the most important improvements that schools can make are to (1) raise expectations of student learning, (2) have clear standards and (3) teach young people how to apply what they've learned. Given a choice from four possible major changes in schools, 30% of voters surveyed want students to participate in projects that connect their studies to real life.

As *America's Public Schools Must Change ... But Can They?* shows, more and more people want schools to make major improvements to serve children better. This is indeed good news to education leaders and many policymakers. But Americans are losing patience. An increasing number of people are concluding that the current public education system cannot and will not make the necessary changes. As a result, they are willing to consider alternatives to the public education system. And people willing to look at these options cut across political parties and ideologies, ethnic groups, ages, income and education levels.

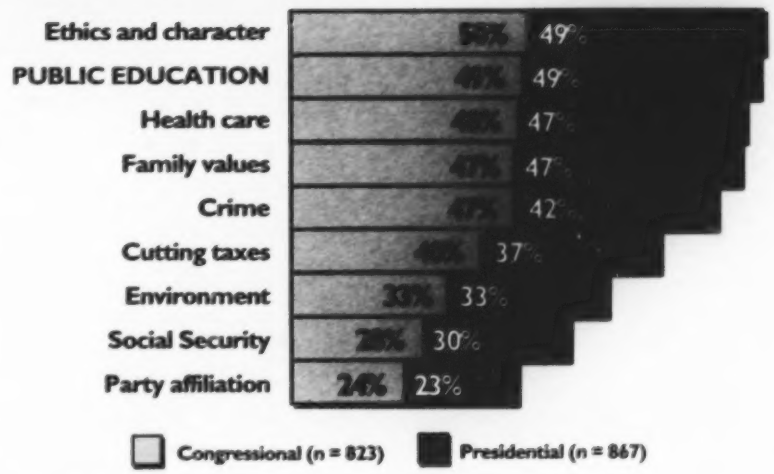
PUBLIC EDUCATION TOPS VOTERS' CONCERNS

One in two voters (49%) say that candidates' stands on public education made a real difference in who they voted for in presidential and congressional races. In fact, the issue of public education tied in voters' minds with ethics and character of candidates. It ranked higher in importance than health care, family values, crime, cutting taxes, the environment, Social Security and even party affiliation. Interestingly, 42% of the people surveyed say party affiliation made no difference in how they voted. In the presidential race, a candidate's position on public education (49%) was more important than the believability of a candidate's promises (46%).

WHAT WE ASKED

"Here are some issues and things others have mentioned that made a difference in how they voted for President [or Congress]. For each one, please tell me whether the different candidates' position on these matters was among the most important things that made a real difference in how you voted, made some difference but was not among the most important things or made no difference at all: party affiliation, Social Security, family values, ethics and moral character, crime, health care, believability of promises, cutting taxes, public education and the environment."

Graph 1: We asked voters which issues made a "real difference" in how they voted in presidential and congressional races this year.



Source: ECS

A Closer Look

Some clear differences of opinion emerged along ideological, gender and age categories. A candidate's position on public education, regardless of office being sought, was the most important thing to Democratic voters (63% congressional; 67% presidential); while Republicans rated a candidate's ethics and moral character as most important (66% congressional; 70% presidential). Younger voters (18-34) also clearly rated public education at the very top of their list (53% congressional; 54% presidential), where all other age groups were evenly divided among the issues of family values, public education, ethics and character and health care. Public education was far more important to female voters (53% congressional; 54% presidential) than male voters (45% congressional; 45% presidential). Seven in ten African-American voters say a congressional candidate's stand on public education made a real difference in how they voted — even more so in the presidential race (78%).

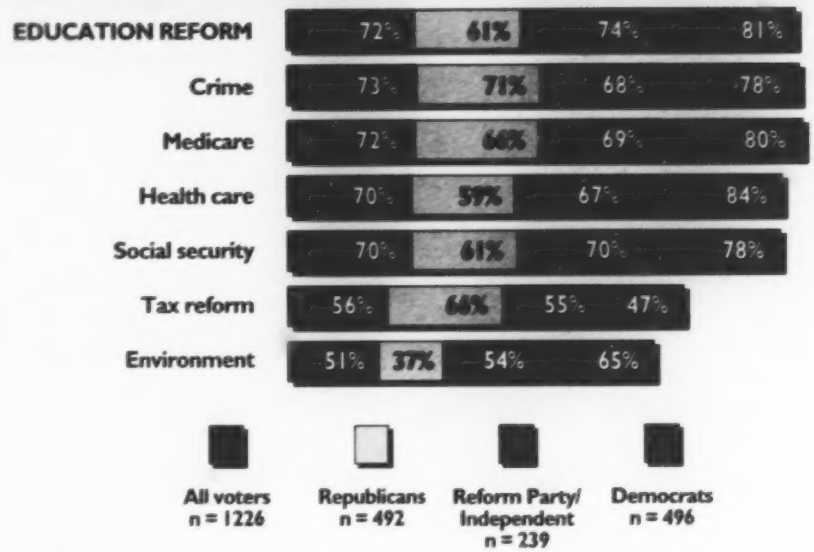
VOTERS WANT CONGRESS TO IMPROVE EDUCATION IN 1997

Voters place education reform at the top of the 1997 congressional agenda, along with crime and Medicare — 72% of the voters give education a very high or top priority for action. Health care, Social Security, tax reform and the environment trailed these issues in importance in voters' minds.

WHAT WE ASKED

"Here is a list of issues which might be on the congressional agenda for 1997. Since Congress cannot deal with all issues at the same time, please tell me which of these issues you think should have a top priority, a very high priority, medium priority or low priority for action: health care, crime, tax reform, Social Security, the environment, education reform and Medicare."

Graph 2: What voters would like to see in the 1997 congressional agenda



Source: ECS

A Closer Look

Democrats and Reform Party/independent voters clearly say education reform should be the leading issue in the 1997 congressional agenda (81% and 74%, respectively) before Congress addresses other important issues like Social Security, health care, crime and Medicare. All voters (men and women) under age 45 also place education reform at the top of their priority level (18-34-year-olds — 84% and 35-44-year-olds — 70%), while older Americans place health care, crime, Social Security and Medicare above education reform on their list of priorities. For African-American voters, education reform resounded loudly as the number one priority (94%), with Hispanic and white voters (93% and 72%, respectively) naming crime as the top issue.

MAJOR PUBLIC SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT FACES MANY OBSTACLES

Public schools are not meeting voters' expectations, and the public feels several obstacles must be addressed before significant improvements can be made. Voters want teaching that clearly links studies to real life, tough academic standards, more parent influence at the school level and less bureaucracy.

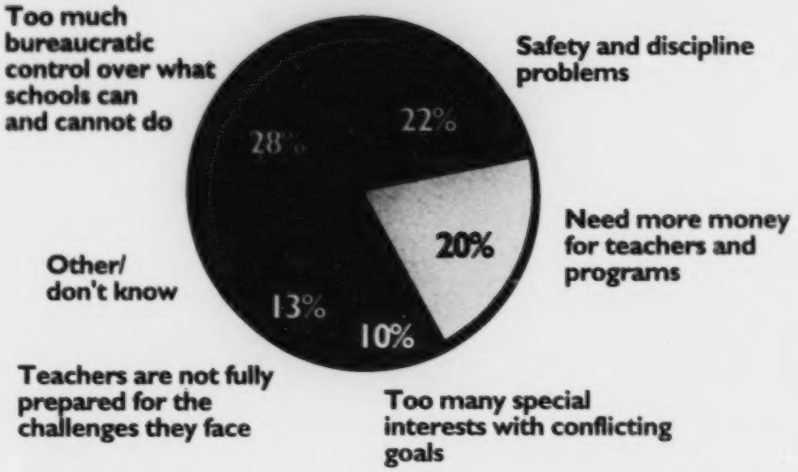
And most people surveyed are clear about the reasons why schools are not measuring up:

- **Too much bureaucratic control over what schools can and cannot do (28%)**
- **Too many safety and discipline problems (22%)**
- **Not enough money for teachers and programs (20%)**
- **Teachers not well-enough prepared for the challenges they face (13%)**
- **Too many special interests with conflicting goals (10%).**

WHAT WE ASKED

"In your opinion, which of the following is the greatest obstacle to needed changes in our public schools: not enough money for teachers and programs, too much bureaucratic control over what schools can and cannot do, too many special interests with conflicting goals, teachers not well-enough prepared for the challenges they face or too many safety and discipline problems?"

Graph 3 What are the greatest obstacles to making needed changes in our public schools?


Too much bureaucratic control over what schools can and cannot do
28%
Safety and discipline problems
22%
Need more money for teachers and programs
20%
Other/ don't know
13%
10%
Teachers are not fully prepared for the challenges they face
Too many special interests with conflicting goals

Source: ECS

A Closer Look

Not all voters are equally concerned about the various problems they identify. Conservative and moderate Republicans, along with conservative Democrats, say that too much bureaucratic control is the main obstacle to change (36%, 26% and 30%, respectively). Those who identify themselves as moderate or liberal Democrats point to insufficient money for teachers and programs as the main obstacle (28%). Reflecting a gender and age gap, older males (over 45) strongly believe that bureaucracy is the biggest obstacle to change (40%), whereas younger women (under 45) believe that not enough money for teachers and programs is the largest obstacle to change (26%). Safety and discipline problems are of greatest concern to those voting for the Reform Party — typically older, blue-collar voters (33%). Among minority voters, African-Americans say lack of funding (28%) and safety and discipline problems (26%) are greater obstacles to change than bureaucracy (16%); 52% of Hispanics identify bureaucracy as the main barrier to change, with lack of funding coming in second at 13%.

HIGHER EDUCATION COULD DO BETTER IF HIGH SCHOOLS WERE BETTER

Higher education could better prepare young people for the job market if students left high school with the necessary skills and knowledge. When asked about factors other than cost that influence higher education's effectiveness in preparing students for the workforce, voters consistently target problems in high schools. Almost half those surveyed say poor academic preparation in high school (47%) is the biggest problem facing young people in getting the kind of higher education that will lead to a job, followed by lack of career guidance and technical training in high school (25%). Of less importance are difficulty in getting career-oriented college courses (14%) and poor college or technical college teaching (5%). These findings held true regardless of political party, gender, age, income, education and race.

WHAT WE ASKED

"Now, think about higher education and the job market. In your opinion, other than cost, which of the following is the greatest obstacle facing our kids in getting the kind of higher education that will lead to a job: poor academic preparation in high school, lack of career guidance and technical training in high school, poor college or technical college teaching or difficulty in getting career-oriented college courses?"

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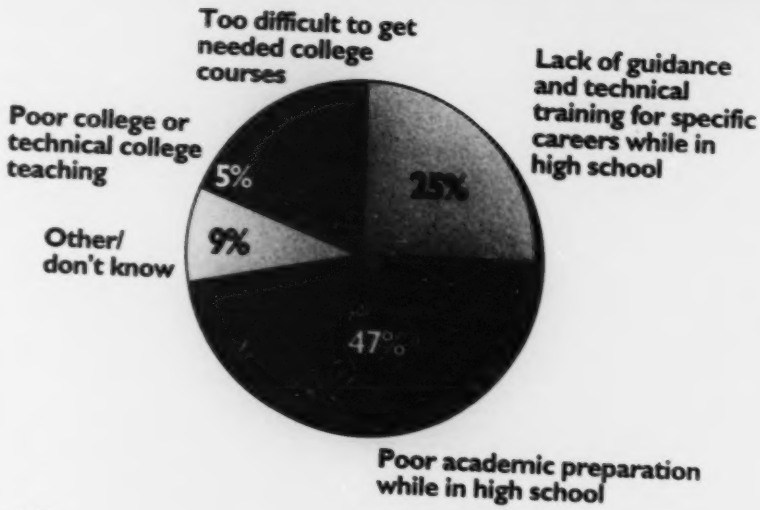
Graph 4: Other than cost, what is the greatest obstacle facing our kids in getting the kind of college education that will lead to a job?


Too difficult to get needed college courses
Lack of guidance and technical training for specific careers while in high school
Poor college or technical college teaching
5%
25%
Other/ don't know
9%
47%
Poor academic preparation while in high school

Source: ECS

VOTERS ARE LOOKING SERIOUSLY AT ALTERNATIVES TO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

More than half the voters surveyed favor a major overhaul of public schools or believe the time has come to look outside the public system to improve the quality of education. Next to parents of children who are currently attending private and parochial schools, the greatest support for alternatives outside the public school system comes from parents of preschool children.

Fifty-four percent of all voters believe major changes are needed to improve education. That group is evenly divided, with 27% believing that public schools have failed to meet students' needs and that new approaches, including home schooling and vouchers for private and parochial schools, should be given a chance; and another 27% believing that only a top-to-bottom overhaul of public schools will improve the quality of education. Twenty-nine percent believe that public schools just need some minor tuning. Another 11% of those surveyed feel that public schools should just be left alone to do their job.

WHAT WE ASKED

"Let's talk about changing public education in your community. Which of these points of view comes closest to your own: the public schools should just be left alone to do their job, the public schools just need some minor tuning to improve the quality of education, only a top-to-bottom overhaul of our public schools will improve the quality of education, or public schools have failed to meet students' needs and a new approach with home schooling and vouchers for private and parochial schools should be given a chance?"

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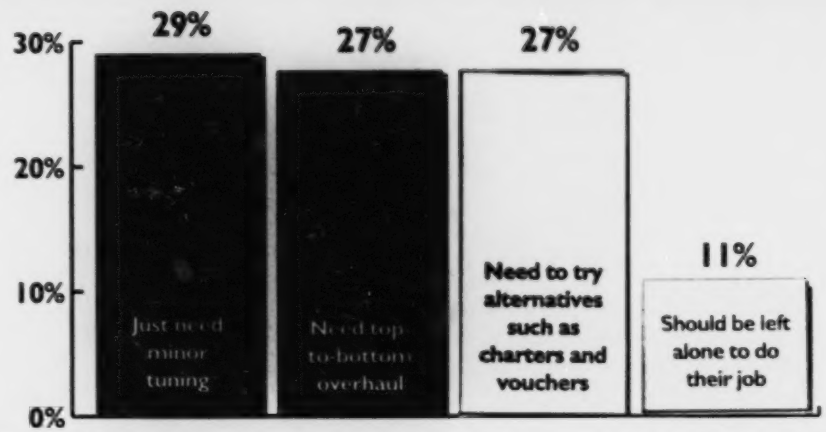
Graph 5: Do schools need to change? If so, in what way?



Source: ECS

A Closer Look

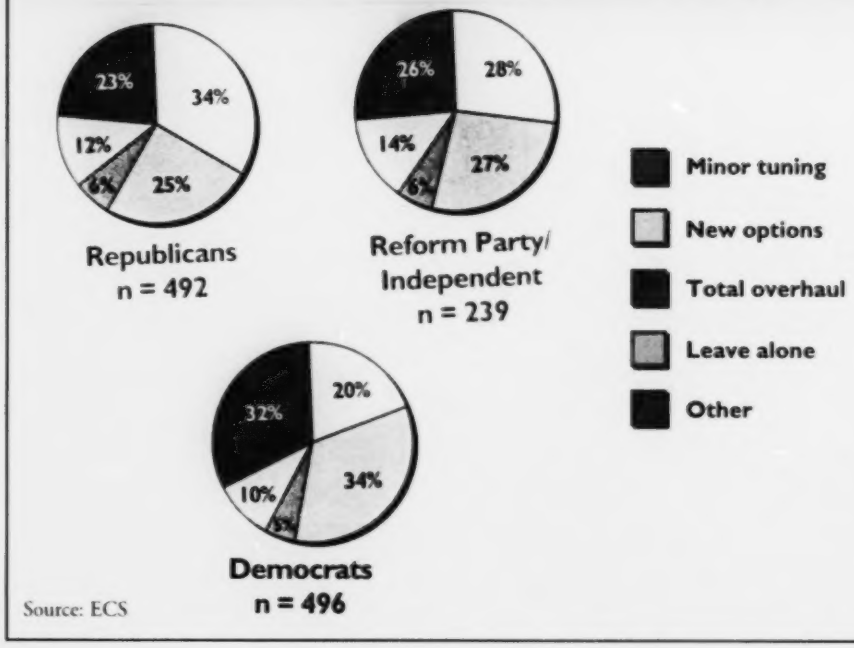
Whether voters describe themselves as conservative or liberal, more than half of those surveyed favor top to bottom overhaul of the public schools or say it's time to try new approaches outside the public system.

Within those numbers, very conservative voters are most inclined to try new approaches (41%), such as home schooling or vouchers for private and parochial schools, as are most Republicans (34%). A majority of Democrats (51%) want major changes in schools, but within that group only 20% favor new approaches outside of the public school system. Approximately a third of Democrats and voters who describe themselves as liberal believe the current system can be improved with minor tuning. All other groups surveyed showed less support for making small changes in the current system.

Next to parents of children in private and parochial schools, the greatest support for alternatives to public education comes from parents whose children are just entering the schools. Forty-four percent of parents with preschool children want new options to consider, and another 16% want to see a total overhaul of the current system.

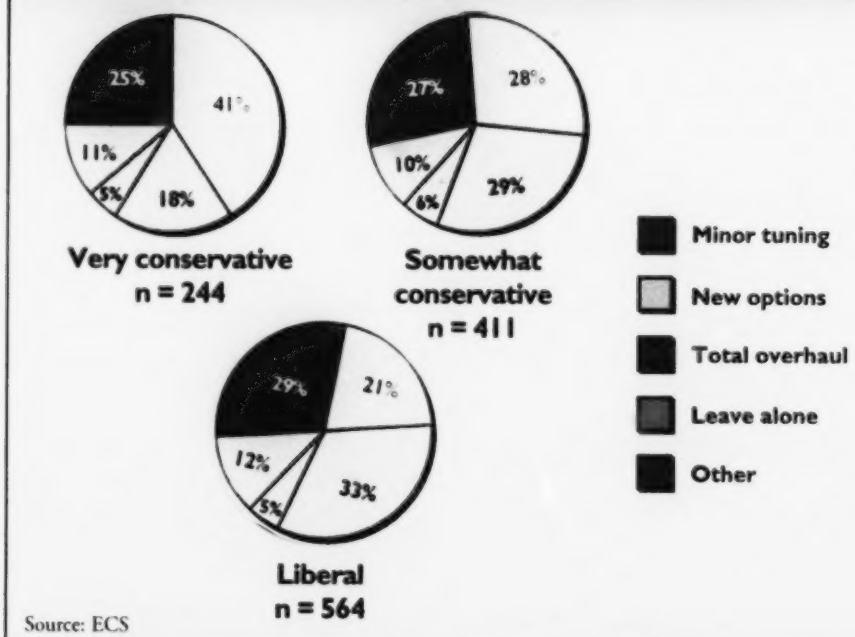
In addition, of those people who feel that education reform needs to be a congressional priority in 1997, the majority of them support a top-to-bottom overhaul (32%) or looking at other approaches outside the system (26%). Somewhat fewer support minor tuning of public schools (28%).

Graph 6: Do schools need to be changed? (by party)



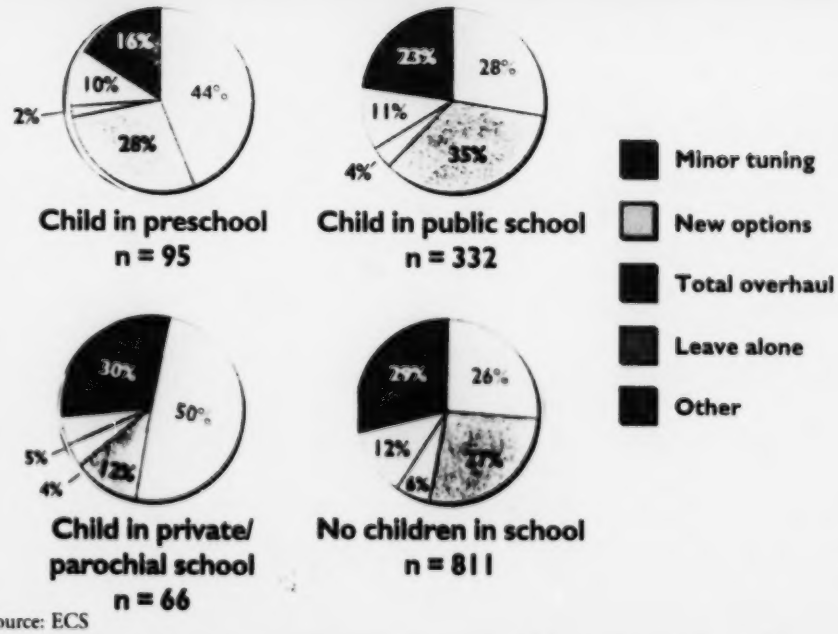
Source: ECS

Graph 7: Do schools need to be changed? (by ideology)



Source: ECS

Graph 8: Do schools need to be changed? (by school attended or age of child)



Source: ECS

IT'S TIME FOR REAL-LIFE LEARNING AND HIGHER STANDARDS IN SCHOOLS

Voters believe the most important improvements that schools can make are to raise expectations of student learning, be clear about what young people are expected to learn and to teach them how to apply what they've learned.

Given a choice from four possible major changes in schools, 30% of voters surveyed want students to participate in projects that connect their studies to real life. Slightly fewer voters (29%) want schools to hold students to higher academic standards that are linked to statewide norms. Approximately one-fifth (21%) of those surveyed believe significant school improvement will occur if parents are more involved in school decisionmaking. Fewer than a fifth (17%) believe giving all children a working knowledge of technology is the single most important improvement schools can make.

WHAT WE ASKED

"Suppose some major changes in the public schools were possible. Which of the following changes in our public schools would you like to see implemented first: hold students to higher academic standards linked to statewide norms, provide a working knowledge of new technology to all kids, teach students projects that connect their studies to real life or share more decisionmaking with parents at the individual school level?"

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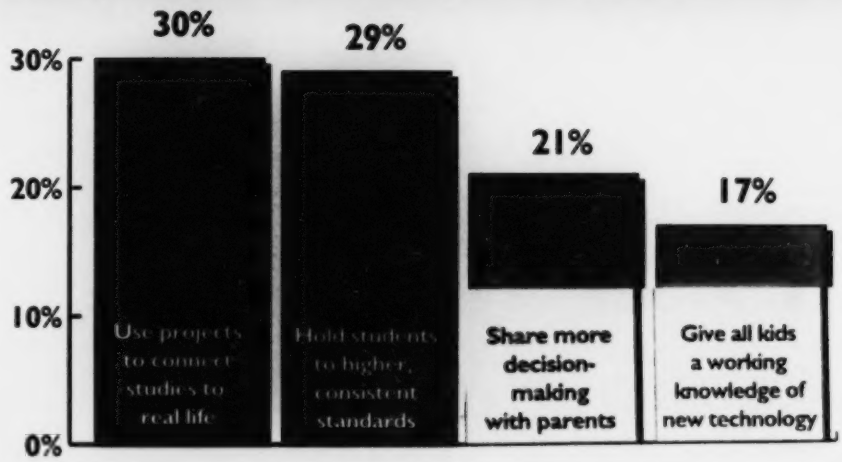
Graph 9: What is the most important major change public schools could make?



Source: ECS

A Closer Look

The most conservative voters are more interested in raising academic standards than other possible school improvements. By a wide margin, Republicans support higher standards as the highest priority (35%) with a fourth of them (26%) believing connecting students' studies to real life would make the most difference. Both Democrats (32%) and Reform Party/independent voters (36%) favor exposing students to projects that will connect their studies to real life. See Chart A.

The education levels of those surveyed also affect the kind of changes they want in schools. College graduates and post-graduates want higher academic standards in place before they consider other changes (35% and 48%); those with a high school education or some college favor connecting students' studies to real life first (35% and 30%). See Chart B.

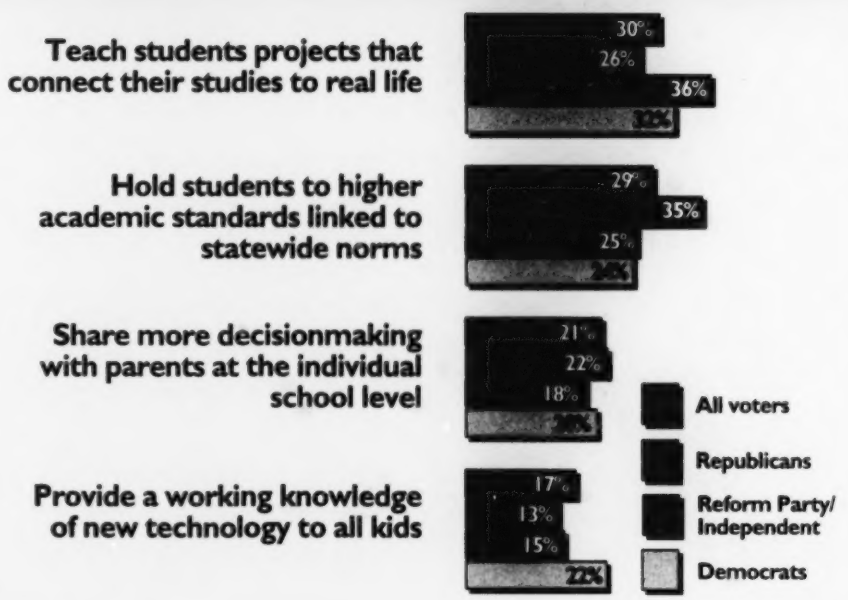
Answers varied by ethnic group as well. Whites are evenly divided among their top two answers of connecting students' studies to real life and holding students to higher academic standards (29% and 30%), while the majority of African-Americans favor connecting studies to real life (43%); Hispanics, on the other hand, favor holding students to higher standards as their first choice (34%). See Chart C.

Lower-income voters (income < $20,000) strongly favor connecting student studies to real life (35%) over any other possible improvement as opposed to middle-to-upper income voters (income > $50,000) who believe higher standards should be the first priority (39%). See Chart D.

Only one group surveyed believes parents hold the key to significant school improvement. More than one-third of the parents with preschool-age children (35%) say the most important change schools can make is to give parents a greater voice in school decisionmaking.

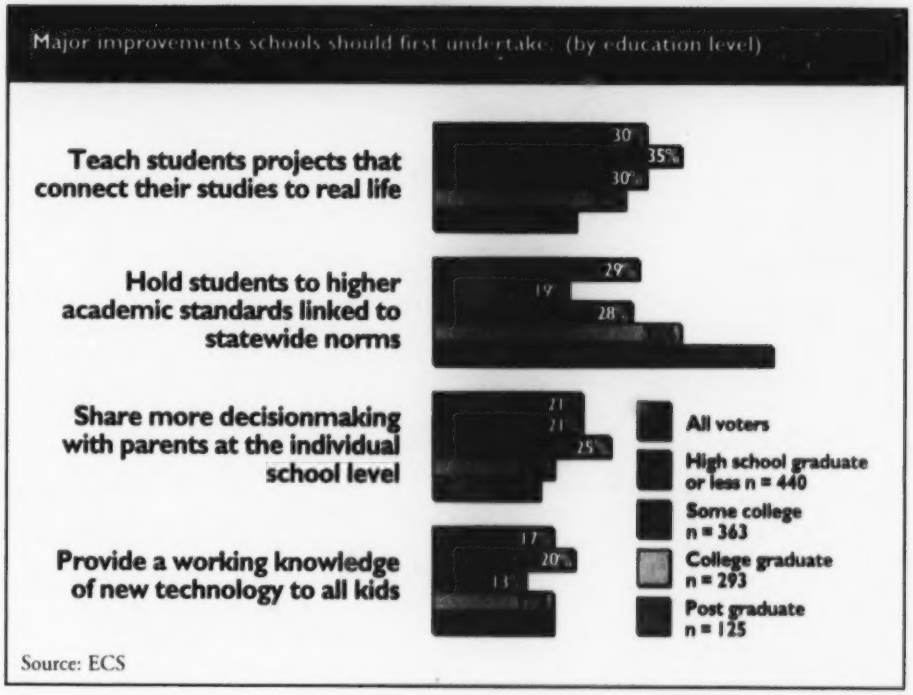
CHART A

Major improvements schools should first undertake. (by party)



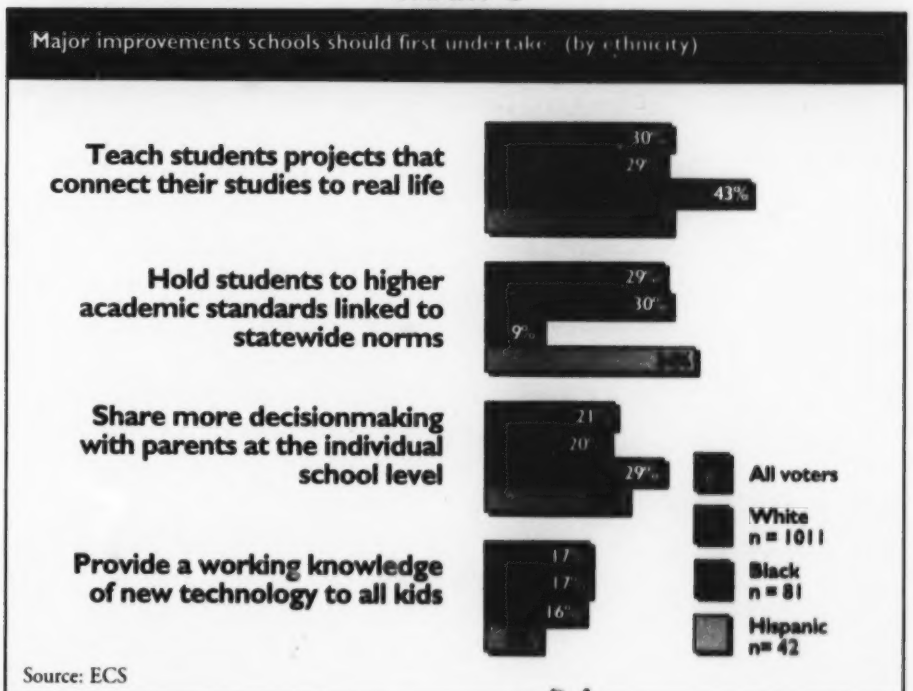
Source: ECS

CHART B



Source: ECS

CHART C



Source: ECS

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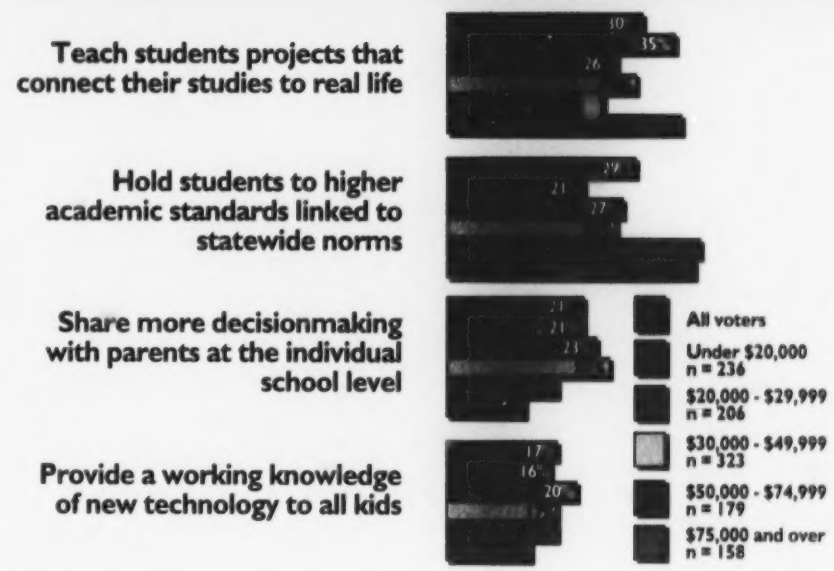
CHART D

Major improvements schools should first undertake. (by income level)



Source: ECS

CONCLUSION AND COMMENT

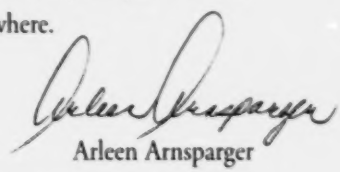
Public concern about the quality of education is at an all-time high. But what was once a whimper of dissatisfaction is quickly becoming a roar of discontent.

As the ECS national survey *America's Public Schools Must Change ... But Can They?* shows, more and more people are agreeing that schools need major improvements to serve children well. This is indeed good news to education leaders and many policymakers. But it is also true that an increasing number of people are concluding that the current public education system cannot and will not make the necessary changes. As a result, they are willing to consider alternatives to the public education system. And people willing to look at these options cut across political parties and ideologies, ethnic groups, ages, income and education levels.

Given the trend many recent surveys and focus groups document, it is highly unlikely that public interest in the quality of education will soon fade. Perhaps the greatest clue to what the future holds is heard in the voices of preschoolers' parents. Next to parents of private and parochial school children, they are the most dissatisfied with public education. Indeed, it appears that voters are on the brink of finding ways to leave a public system that is unable to respond to their needs and interests.

It is quite possible that the direction education takes in this country will be determined by how seriously educators and policymakers consider what the public is telling them, how quickly and boldly leaders respond and how genuine a partnership leaders are willing to forge with the public to find solutions.

The message from the American public — "schools must change" — is compelling. The question they are asking — "but can they?" — must be answered now by the public school system, or people will find the answers they are looking for elsewhere.



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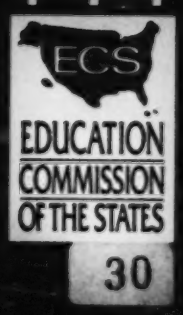

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